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TAGS: PREL MO SP

SUBJECT: SPANISH ROYAL VISIT TO CEUTA AND MELILLA BACKFIRES  
IN SPAIN

REF: A. MADRID DAILY REPORT 11/02/07

1B. RABAT 1695

Classified By: DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION HUGO LLORENS, REASONS 1.4B AND D

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11. (C) The strong Moroccan reaction to the November 5-6 visit of the King and Queen of Spain to Ceuta and Melilla seems to have caught the Zapatero government completely by surprise. When Morocco recalled its ambassador, Spanish FM Moratinos and his number two, Bernardino Leon, were reportedly spending All Saints Day (effectively a four-day weekend for most Spaniards) out of the country. Moratinos was on a semi-private visit to Morocco to attend a cultural event and Leon was in Tunisia for the opening of a film festival.

12. (C) Zapatero visited Ceuta and Melilla in 2006, and criticism was more muted than now. Also, a visit by the Prince of Asturias in 2006 aroused relatively little controversy. The problem this time may be the head of state aspect of the visit and its timing, which coincides with the thirty-second anniversary of Morocco's "Green March" into the Western Sahara. Moreover, Morocco is in a prickly mood because the activist Spanish judge Baltazar Garzon announced October 30 he would investigate possible crimes of genocide by Moroccan officials in Western Sahara.

13. (C) On November 4, a long weekend got longer for Zapatero when French President Sarkozy landed in Madrid to return four Spanish flight attendants who had been jailed in Chad October 25 in a bizarre case in which a French NGO using a chartered Spanish plane attempted to airlift to France 100 "orphans," some of whom were apparently not orphans. Zapatero and Moratinos were reduced to the role of spectators as Sarkozy received the embraces of the Spanish women he had freed. The comparison between Sarkozy's personal intervention and Zapatero's perceived passivity was widely noted, and Sarkozy's statement that Zapatero was kept informed of all of the French initiatives seemed somewhat left-handed. The cruelest cut may have come from the generally left-leaning daily *El País*, which reported that the Spanish Foreign Ministry had not even been able to organize a plane to go to Chad to repatriate the flight attendants.

14. (C) Comment: Timing is everything. We suspect the Zapatero government saw the royal visit four months before Spain's elections as a relatively low cost way to wave the flag and beat back criticism from conservatives who say Zapatero is weak in the face of regional encroachments on the central government's power and tepid in defense of the popular King Juan Carlos. Zapatero's foreign policy advisors may have calculated that the fallout from the King's visit would be manageable. It may still prove so, but the fracas,

coming on top of the public perception that Spain was impotent in Chad, has probably only reinforced Zapatero's image as a leader who is weak on foreign relations. We also doubt FM Moratinos stock has risen over this.

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